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C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 000906

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: BURMA WATCHES AS MONKS CONTINUE PROCESSIONS

REF: RANGOON 900 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary. Since September 16, we have confirmed at least ten processions by monks in five separate states and divisions in Burma. On September 19, monks led processions in Rangoon and Mandalay. Embassy sources reported that the day before, police in Sittwe used tear gas to disperse a march of about 1,000 monks, but we received no reports of any other clashes with security forces. Several journalists tell us they have been harassed for covering these processions. Security in Rangoon and the rest of Burma remains tight. End Summary.

12. (C) An Embassy source in the city of Mandalay reported approximately 1,000 monks led a procession through the city the afternoon of September 19. As with previous marches, the monks recited traditional Buddhist chants but did not make any overt political statements. Security forces followed the march closely but did not intervene and made no arrests, according to witnesses. Our source told us that several senior citizens on the side of the road chanted prayers in support of the monks but no one joined in the march. This was the first monk-led protest this year in Mandalay, Burma's second largest city.

13. (C) RSO staff observed approximately 100 monks stage a procession through Rangoon on the morning of September 19. We saw a different group of about 150 monks marching in another area of the city later in the day. As with the march in Mandalay, authorities closely followed them but did not interfere. No arrests were reported. Unlike yesterday, we did not see any significant groups of spectators following the monks, although a steady rainfall throughout the day may have kept people away.

14. (C) Embassy sources confirmed approximately 1,000 monks led a procession through downtown Sittwe the afternoon of September 18. Witnesses told us police fired warning shots and used tear gas when the monks attempted to enter the Rakhine State Peace and Development Council offices. We are seeking to confirm reports four monks were arrested and one city employee was slightly injured in the confrontation. Our contacts also reported another September 18 procession of several hundred monks in Bago ended peacefully and without any arrests.

15. (C) Journalists told us they have been increasingly harassed by authorities for covering these events. Burmese stringers for AP and NHK said security personnel seized cell

phones, cameras, and other equipment from them as they attempted to cover yesterday's march in Rangoon. Police reportedly tried to detain another local reporter for the Kyodo news agency. He lost his camera but managed to break free and leave the area.

¶6. (C) Security in Rangoon and the rest of Burma remains tight. The normally bustling Shwe Dagon Pagoda has been closed since Tuesday, as have several major roads in Rangoon, including the road past Aung San Suu Kyi's house. Sources in Mandalay reported major streets and intersections in downtown were blocked off and police were visible throughout the city.

¶7. (C) Comment. These processions are significant. With the exception of Sittwe, authorities have been hesitant to intervene and many speculated they may have specific orders to avoid confrontation. Similarly, ordinary people have been following the processions closely but remain reluctant to join in, perhaps because some monks have asked them not to. The authorities are gambling that the protests will die down.

At the same time the protestors seemed determined to keep showing their discontent. The turning point will come when popular discontent trumps the fear of the military. End Comment.

VILLAROSA